

Heritage Eco-tourism Symposium

Rota, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), is a clean, beautiful, and friendly tropical paradise rich in cultural and natural resources. The objective of the recent (February 28–March 3) symposium was to bring together all of the stakeholders in the tourism industry, owners and stewards of heritage ecotourism sites, and resource specialists to discuss how to ensure resource protection and preservation, encourage and foster greater cooperation and coordination, enhance visitor experience, provide public education, and promote economic growth in a responsible and sustainable manner. The goal was to look at ways to guide the planning of resources development sensitive to the continued health and well being of these resources while providing a quality experience for the visitor. The symposium format was selected to encourage dialogue.



Symposium participants and instructors evaluate the Mochoong Latte Village using the SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) Assessment. Photo by David Look

The symposium, co-chaired by David Look and Joseph P. DeLeon Guerrero of the CNMI, was co-sponsored by the CNMI Historic Preservation Office (HPO), Mariana Visitor Authority (MVA), CNMI Dept. of Land and Natural Resources, the NPS Office of Tourism, USDA Forest Service, Pacific Asia Travel Association Foundation, National Trust for Historic Preservation (NTHP) Heritage Tourism Program, Micronesian Endowment for Historic Preservation, and other organizations. Attended by approximately 100 participants from throughout Micronesia, the United States, and Australia, the symposium made a substantial contribution to the management of cultural and natural resources in Micronesia while encouraging

ways to develop heritage eco-tourism that is responsible and sustainable.

Tourism in the CNMI in the wake of the Asian economic crisis was discussed by Perry Tenorio, (MVA). Dr. Parsons (USDA-Forest Service) introduced the audience to ecotourism and how to do rapid SWOT (strength, weaknesses, opportunity, and threats) Assessment of sites. Amy Webb (NTHP) discussed heritage tourism, citing many examples of how to bring sites alive, to find the fit between community and tourism, and to fulfil visitors needs. Karen Gustin (War in the Pacific National Historical Park) discussed aspects of site interpretation. Mark Rudo (NPS) reviewed resource protection and preservation, while Dirk Spennemann presented the identification and assessment of resources and addressed visitor impact and the “cultural baggage” visitors bring with them. Humanities’ role in education and interpretation was stressed by William Barrineau. Bill Hocog and Isaac Calvo explained the RARE Education Campaign. Case studies were used to illustrate resource protection (Truk Lagoon), and balancing visitor needs and impacts (Willandra Lakes World Heritage Area).

Participants conducted afternoon SWOT Assessments of 10 sites with group discussions the following morning. Draft recommendations were presented to the mayor of Rota on the last day at a session facilitated by John Heather (University of Guam); a final report including all of the SWOT Assessments has been sent to the mayor. Copies are available from David Look.

The symposium was highly successful in establishing a dialogue that allowed participants to present their concerns and to listen to other points of view. Unfortunately, there were no representatives of the airlines, as the carriers do not attend tourism conferences because they frequently become the target of criticism for the number and scheduling of flights. Only time will tell if the symposium goal will be fully met; but hopefully Rota’s heritage of unique cultural and natural resources will survive for the enjoyment and education of many generations of residents and visitors.

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